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SUBJECT: THE OPPOSITION CHALLENGES PRIME MINISTER MELES IN
PARLIAMENT

Summary

1. (U) Opposition Parliamentarians offered critical comments of President Girma Woldegiorgis, October 8 remarks at the opening session of Parliament during the monthly questioning session of the Prime Minister. UEDF leader and informal leader of the opposition Beyene Petros, CUD/P leader Temskgen Zewdie and ODFM leader Bulcha Demeksa struck a common theme of criticism of the government for not advancing democratic values. Beyene cited the failure of the interparty talks, Temeskgen highlighted failed economic policies resulting in heightened inflation, and Bulcha provided the most pointed criticism calling on the government to explain the arrests without due process of scores of Oromo citizens, citing 204 specific cases but hinting that hundreds and perhaps thousands maybe detained.

2. (U) The Prime Minister responded that the opposition parties walked out of interparty talks but welcomed them back if they committed to not leaving talks in the future. He dropped the condition of expression of apologies as noted by other ruling EPRDF members. The Prime Minister expressed concern over inflation and low salaries, but stated that the economy is improving with nearly 10 percent annual growth. He cautioned that it would take time to empower the public. On arrests, the Prime Minister said that suspected OLF and rebels were detained and that investigations were being conducted. Finally, he dismissed calls by the opposition to leave Somalia noting that if Somalia is not stabilized Ethiopian troops may have to return to Somalia.

3. (U) It was apparent that the questioning period lacked any drama and unexpected issues. Both sides stated their familiar positions. Troubling is the lack of engagement and discussion on how to promote political dialogue. We will continue to help facilitate discussions between the opposition and ruling party and plan to meet leaders from both camps in our regular meetings in the coming days. End summary.

The Opposition Demands Answers

4. (U) Parliament convened October 23 for questioning of the Prime Minister. Opposition leaders focused criticism on

President Girma,s opening remarks to Parliament, delivered October 8, as the basis for critical remarks to the Prime Minister. UEDF leader and informal leader of the opposition Beyene Petros listed common opposition themes. He complained about inflation and the low salaries, especially in the private sector, calling on the Government to take action. He noted the failure of the interparty talks which has resulted in the lack of a dialogue between the ruling party and opposition on critical legislation such as the a draft press law expected to be tabled before Parliament in coming weeks. Beyene also questioned the Prime Minister on human rights and humanitarian crisis in the Ogaden. He demanded an explanation of what the government was doing. Beyene concluded by noting that there was continued conflict among the various ethnic groups and demanded the government,s immediate attention to alleviate tensions.

¶5. (U) CUDP leader Temesgen Zewdie focused on what he called the failed economic policies of the government. He noted that market interference particularly in forcing farmers to sell their food products undermined sound and basic economic principles. He argued that unemployment and the failure to create jobs were not being addressed, adding to the suffering of the public. Temesgen questioned the absence of democratic values citing the passage of the Broadcast law and the debate on the draft Press Law without opposition input. Finally, Temesgen called for Ethiopia,s soldiers to return from Somalia and criticized the government for following too closely the African Union. He said these are Ethiopian troops and questioned what the AU was doing.

¶6. (U) OFDM leader Bulcha Demeksa was the most vocal in criticism of the government for unexplained arrests of 204 Oromos in recent weeks. He speculated that there could be

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hundreds and perhaps thousands, and asked why Oromos were being detained without due process. He demanded an open and transparent legal process.

The Prime Minister Responds

¶7. The Prime Minister responded in a very methodical manner addressing each point. Meles defended the President,s speech, saying that it clearly touched on the issues raised by the opposition. First, Prime Minister Meles said the government is committed to democracy and good governance. He underscored the responsibility of the government to address questions of fighting corruption and promoting good governance. He admitted that Ethiopia can and needs to make improvements, noting that democracy is still a &work in process,8 but the path that the government is following is correct and is addressing problems. It will take time, he cautioned.

¶8. (U) On interparty talks, the Prime Minister said it was the opposition that dropped out of the process. He called on the opposition to return with the caveat that they commit themselves to working with the ruling party and not boycotting future discussions. He dropped the condition of apology for restarting talks, which EPRDF Central Committee member Bereket Simon has insisted on for the past several months. On the passage of the Broadcast Law, the Prime Minister said the opposition did have an opportunity to adjust the drafts, make recommendations and add amendments, but ultimately, the law needed to move forward.

¶9. (U) The Prime Minister addressed economic policies by noting that the government is committed to fighting poverty and improve productivity. He noted that the government needs to focus on building capacity and improving structures and institutions. Fighting corruption remains important. He added that government oversight is sometimes necessary to correct problems and prevent the public good from being harmed. Faith that the market will always make correct

decisions is not accurate and that government oversight is always needed to maximize efficiencies. If economic development fails, the government must intervene to help regulate and promote progress. All countries engage in market adjustments. On low private sector salaries, the Prime Minister said the government cannot and must not interfere because it could make the situation worse. Meles argued that companies make rational decisions, government interference could have negative impacts, and oil and farm prices are rising and farm prices are rising. Still, the Prime Minister stated that "We must try to keep prices down."

¶10. (U) Somalia is an issue of national security, the Prime Minister argued. Ethiopia must not leave until there is order or else Ethiopian troops may be called on to return. On the Ogaden, the ONLF has undermined security. National Security advisor Abey Tsehayle led efforts to reach out to the ONLF. Meles claimed that the GoE had sought to meet the ONLF overseas but the ONLF refused to meet in direct discussions. There was no dialogue or effort by the ONLF to meet. "They killed innocent people in the Ogaden," Meles stated, "but we continue to hold out the option of direct talks with the ONLF. But the ONLF must abide by the constitution and peaceful efforts."

¶11. (U) On the arrests of Oromos, the Prime Minister argued that only OLF supporters and rebels were being detained and were under investigation. Like the ONLF, the Prime Minister said the government reached out to the OLF to meet with them. The government remains open but the OLF must abide by the constitution. If there is evidence of wrongdoing we will prosecute, Meles ended.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Both sides stated their respective positions without much drama or new issues raised. The questioning

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period is defined to help the ruling party. There is no follow-up questions and the opposition is limited in the time to ask questions while the Prime Minister is not limited. The lack of inter-party dialogue is a concern and a priority for the Embassy. Post will continue to facilitate talks through our regular discussions.
YAMAMOTO